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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0445
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1200
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 3515
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1333
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1769
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2324
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUCPDOC/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL, EEB, DS/SI/IS, DS/SI/CS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PHUM ECON SOCI KPAO TX
SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: LIMITED BANDWIDTH AND PRICE HINDER PROGRESS
ON INTERNET ACCESS A YEAR INTO REFORM

REF: A) 07 ASHGABAT 0241, B) 07 ASHGABAT 0862, C) 07 ASHGABAT 1144,
D) ASHGABAT 0052

¶1. Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over a year into reforms under President
Berdimuhamedov, Internet access for ordinary citizens is still
limited. Despite the President's early steps towards providing
Internet cafes and his statements that all citizens should have
access to the Internet, little progress has been made beyond the
words. This may be another case of where the president knew where
he wanted the country to go, without anyone having a complete
understanding of what it takes to get there. Poor capacity and
technological problems, such as limited bandwidth, are major
factors. Telephone infrastructure, both land lines and cell phones,
is also poor. There are no affordable private or commercial
Internet service providers for the general public. Foreign and
international missions which provide public Internet access --
particularly the Embassy's Information Resource Center (IRC) --
remain a critical component of Internet access in Turkmenistan. The
current Internet environment is also reason to step up U.S. efforts
to support public Internet access. END SUMMARY.

A GOOD START

¶3. (SBU) The first state Internet cafe was opened in Ashgabat
around the time of President Berdimuhamedov's inauguration in
February 2007. The President made well-publicized comments on the
need for widespread Internet access. The state-controlled press
carried articles explaining the benefits of the Internet. It all
seemed to be paving the way for a major state effort at "wiring" the
country.

STATE CONTROL OF INTERNET ACCESS

¶4. (SBU) For most people, the only Internet provider in the country
is the state-owned company, Turkmen Telecom. This company offers
only dial-up access, which tends to be slow and unreliable.

Reportedly, no new personal accounts have been granted to users since 2002. Few own personal computers, so the vast majority of those who want to use the Internet must rely on state Internet cafes. While there have been rumors that private companies have recently been able to obtain Turkmen Telecom accounts, post is unable to confirm. Individuals have reported that when applying for Turkmen Telecom accounts they are told none are available for "technical reasons." (NOTE: Turkmenistan has limited bandwidth. For example, the Embassy's IRC reportedly has greater bandwidth (2 Mg) through its two-way satellite dish than the entire Turkmen Telecom Internet network. END NOTE.)

¶5. (SBU) The Internet Access and Training Program, which has re-opened three centers in the past year, is forced to depend on partners who have held on to Turkmen Telecom accounts since before ¶2002. There are a handful of expensive two-way satellite dish Internet Service Providers available in Turkmenistan. However, the cost is so prohibitively high -- and the bureaucratic hurdles for gaining approval for satellite Internet lines are so complex -- that only foreign missions and a few foreign companies use this option.

STATE-OWNED AND STATE-MONITORED INTERNET CAFES

¶6. (SBU) At present, post is aware of only 15 state-owned Internet cafes. There are four known state-owned cafes in Ashgabat with the other eleven dispersed in major regional cities. Prices have gone down slightly since last year to 60,000 manat (about $3.00 USD) per hour, which is still very expensive for the average citizen. (NOTE: The average mid-level breadwinner in Ashgabat earns roughly $140/month. END NOTE.) Slow and irregular access speeds hardly justify the expense. One visitor reported spending about an hour to open a single email. Most cafes typically have no more than one or two users at a time, although an Ashgabat cafe located next to the

popular Russian bazaar is frequently crowded, as well as one in Mary city.

¶7. (SBU) The use of these computers is heavily, yet inconsistently, regulated. In most locations, users must give the staff their passports or identification to register before being permitted to use the computers. Strangely, two Internet cafe's in Turkmenabat city do not seem to require any identification. In other cafes, foreigners have also been allowed use without providing identification. Most cafe's appear to block opposition websites with software controls. Reports from spring and summer 2007 indicated that access appeared to be unhindered, but in recent months users trying to access opposition websites were consistently blocked. The monitoring and staff intervention are irregular as well. Staff members at some cafes seem to care little about their users or their web surfing habits. Meanwhile, cafe employees in Turkmenabat specifically warn users not to visit certain websites.

INTERNET ACCESS IN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

¶8. (SBU) The government promised the installation of Internet access in all universities and, initially, in 20 primary schools. However, access, where it exists at all, is generally slow and not widely used. University instructors and others say that few people use their institutions' large, but slow Internet computer labs, because it is not worth the time spent. The same people prefer accessing the Internet across town at the Embassy's Information Resource Center. Although the Ministry of Education claims to have "wired" twenty primary schools for Internet access, no list of those schools has ever been provided. Teachers at some schools report that computer equipment was installed, but as yet Internet access is not operating.

OTHER STATE-OWNED OPTIONS FOR INTERNET ACCESS?

¶9. (SBU) The National Library in Turkmenistan was supposed to have opened a 150-computer Internet cafe/information center for the public in February 2007. At present, their computers are not connected to the Internet, due to technical problems. And the Library director puzzlingly explains that first they will create an

electronic catalog of the library's collection and then they will connect to the Internet - implying that a catalog is the pre-requisite. (COMMENT: We wonder if library officials are planning to create an intranet system that allows users to access items in the library's collection rather than the Internet. END COMMENT.) (NOTE: A National Library staff member regularly, but quietly, accesses the Internet from the Embassy's IRC for work. END NOTE.)

A PRIVATE OPTION TO SAVE THE DAY? -- NO

¶10. (SBU) In late 2007, the Russian-owned mobile phone network MTS advertised that they would soon offer web access via cell phones on their network in Turkmenistan. Its launch was first slated for November. Later the start was delayed to January 2008. To date, MTS has not yet started to provide this service for technical reasons.

INTERNET ACCESS THROUGH FOREIGN-SPONSORED ENTITIES

¶11. (SBU) The U.S. Embassy's IRC, American Corners, and IATP centers, along with UN, OSCE, and UK-supported public Internet centers remain the only real alternatives. Many of these centers, especially local partner grantees, are reliant on slow connections through Turkmen Telecom.
During the past year, monthly usage of the IRC's Internet terminals has increased by about 50%. Over half of users reported in a recent survey that they usually wait in line 30 minutes or more for access to a terminal. And a good number of those users who have tried to use State Internet Cafes do not go back a second time, due to the

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expense, the connection speeds, the blocking of certain websites, and the perception that they are being monitored. A recent survey of users also shows almost universal praise that the United States is providing such valuable access to information. Users include some government professionals who use the IRC's Internet for their work, including state journalists and an employee of the Turkmen Institute of Democracy and Human Rights (Ref. B). A common complaint from IRC users is that they would like more Internet options than either the state or the state-dominated marketplace is providing.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Bandwidth limitations and expense seem to have hindered the growth of Internet access. Despite a well-publicized and welcome start to providing real Internet access in Turkmenistan, the government has not been able to follow through. This may be another case of where the president knew where he wanted the country to go, without a complete understanding of what it takes to get there. To overcome this problem, Turkmenistan would have to improve local infrastructure. Local telephone lines are in such bad condition that they cannot really support expanded Internet. Turkmenistan does not have the capability to do WiFi. They would have to build repeater sites. Outside of limited areas, such as larger cities, there is no cell phone access. In addition, the country would have to improve its international gateway connection. Currently, there is only one through Uzbekistan and there is limited carrying capacity. All of this could cost tens of millions of dollars, if not more. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND